

### Raúl Ruiz: An Annotated Filmography

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*The Hypothesis of the Stolen Painting  
(L'Hypothèse du tableau volé, France, 1978)*

Thomas Elsaesser



Imagine Peter Greenaway, on leave from the Central Office of Information, accepting a commission from the Arts Council to do a documentary on Anthony Blunt, and turning in a filmed interview with John Gielgud (playing a collector) who sets out to prove that Landseer's paintings are full of scatological references to mid-Victorian society scandals. Translated into French terms, this would yield one – but only one – layer of Raúl Ruiz's *The Hypothesis of the Stolen Painting*, the story of a collection of paintings by Tonnerre, a French academic painter of the mid-nineteenth century, whose rather undistinguished works, with no consistency in style or subject matter, are said to have provoked a major but mysterious society scandal. However, to complete my hypothetical analogy, one would have to add that Ruiz has made the state of exile (in turn mimicking and mocking France, his host country, with equal conviction) the starting point for an erudite but nonetheless highly ironic study of the difference between filmic and pictorial rules of representation which leaves one wondering until well into the middle of the film whether Ruiz might not, after all, be serious with his conceit of these paintings bearing a dangerous secret.

What Ruiz has in common with Greenaway is a gift for mimicry as travesty (Ian Christie, talking about Ruiz's television work, once referred to 'the strategies of parody and literalism'), which is to say, a sharp awareness of the tacit assumptions underlying the conventions of non-fiction film and television. Followed to the letter by a determined director, these television conventions of the filmed interview have the same disruptive effect on our sense of reality as a work-to-rule of Post Office workers has on our mail delivery. Ruiz once indicated that he might actually be an admirer of Greenaway ('Seeing *The Falls*, I found there my own hatred of British television, of the BBC with all its artificiality, the false efficiency that people are now trying to copy in France'), but he makes quite un-English use of the deliriously straight-faced British approach to wildly improbable narrative premises.

For whereas parodies of television manners in Britain tend to beget either the rather fussy elegance of Greenaway, or the funny but sometimes facile nihilism of Monty Python, Ruiz's parody of tasteful French connoisseurship (in the tradition of André Malraux, for instance) in *The Hypothesis of the Stolen Painting* leads, on admittedly playful and labyrinthine paths, straight to the moral-philosophical tales of Eric Rohmer or Jacques Rivette. This, of course, may itself be a ruse, since *Hypothesis*, together with *Suspended Vocation*, was the visiting card for Ruiz's gaining admittance to the still quite limited circle of Francophile foreigners accepted as honorary Paris intellectuals, and thus permitted to use – occasionally even misuse – the funds of the national television channels.

The story, with its fanciful premise of a series of paintings linked obliquely to each other (and thereby protecting an embarrassing secret) by a random alternation of formal devices, mythic motifs, esoteric references and hidden clues, is a typical example of a *récit emboité*, or shaggy dog story. It makes of *The Hypothesis of a Stolen Painting* a very literary meditation on the subject of parallel worlds, of messages disguising themselves as accidents and coincidences revealing

the hand of fate. Ruiz courteously pays tribute to Jorge Luis Borges, Italo Calvino and the paranoid histories of Thomas Pynchon. But like Umberto Eco's *The Name of the Rose*, it is also a detective story. The clues, pointing as they do to a conspiracy and a cover-up 'out there' in the world of history - on the side of the referent, so to speak - shape themselves even more convincingly into an allegory of 'in here', i.e. of reading and the mind's need for sense-making. The conspiracy is that of the sign, which can overturn one's hold on the real, simply by opening up a gap and positing a missing link: in this case, a supposedly stolen painting, removed from the series to make the rest indecipherable, random. Here, forming a hypothesis, in itself an insubstantial and unsubstantiated conjecture, is enough to plant the seeds of both doubt and possibility, and instantly instill the oppressive quiddity of some banal paintings with an air of mystery and suspense - not by presenting fresh evidence, but by repressing, subtracting evidence, or if you like, adding an absence. The English translation (referring to a stolen painting) is deficient, because what Ruiz' original title refers to are not paintings but *tableaux*, in fact *tableaux vivants*, which he subjects to several readings, varying the context or isolating a detail.

Once cued to these dual and triple registers, the film can be enjoyed as a sophisticated play with the narrative possibilities contained in static images, the stories that linger within or at the edges of a visual representation. And as an exercise in perverse readings, demonstrating both the necessity and the impossibility of interpretation, *Hypothesis* gives more than a passing nod in the direction of Roland Barthes, Jacques Derrida and theories of textual deconstruction. For instance, one of the *tableaux* even refers to the ambiguous role of an androgynous figure, 'the principle of indefiniteness': an allusion not only to Pierre Klossowski's novel *Baphomet*, but also to a central motif in Barthes' *S/Z*.

The openness of the film, however, is ultimately more apparent than real. Ruiz moves rather systematically through different modes of interpretation, while cunningly suggesting there is a progression from *tableau* to *tableau* which will eventually establish a coherent whole. Symbolic, allegorical, mystical and historical readings follow each other not in pursuit of a final truth, but rather to demonstrate, in the manner of practical criticism and close reading, the range of Russian formalist criteria of pertinence, signification and meaning. If this sounds dry and pedantic, the film itself is too much second cousin to Orson Welles' *F for Fake* (1974) - and too caught up in the pleasures of telling tall tales - not to want to milk the lore of Freemasons, Rosicrucians, Crusaders and other secret conspiracies for all the surreal encounters they can yield (in the spirit of Max Ernst's pseudo-narrative collages). Thus, the society scandal finally revealed, then reading the *tableaux* 'correctly' turns out to be itself possibly no more than a ploy to disguise an even more dastardly plot - the revival of a secret military sect or brotherhood.

Two possibly contradictory aims contend with each other. Ruiz's fascination with the underworld of meaning indicates a healthy scepticism towards the interpretative strategies of this century's dominant 'secret societies' in the empire of signs - Marxism and psychoanalysis, of which Ruiz has said that they are 'Gothic systems: an exterior facade and an enigma buried within', always aiming to produce the same master text. As an exile, living in the interstices of several cultures, dogmas and systems, Ruiz evidently prefers to consider interpretation mainly as a matter of staging most effectively the chance confrontation of one text with another. If a particularly anodyne family portrait can be made to seem riddled with mystery and scandal when passages from a mildly pornographic nineteenth-century novel are made to connect with its grouping

of figures, then the enigma resides in neither the *tableau* nor the novel, but in the miraculous matching of voice and image.

A wholly imaginary world comes into being which owes little to reality or fiction, and much to the cinema's power to conjure up presence from absence. The philosophy implicit here evidences a total scepticism about cinema's supposed realism. In one *tableau*, the voice-over commentary points out that respect for the laws of perspective may simply be a concession to the vulgar pleasures of recognition and identification, the better to mask that other message and purpose of the painting, which is to be part of a chain: its linking elements are a number of purely formal devices (light/shade, circle/crescent/sphere) which end up reducing the representational content to a mere support function.

The literary pretext of *The Hypothesis of the Stolen Painting*, however, is a novel by Klossowski, commentator on de Sade, actor in Bresson's *Au hasard, Balthazar* (1966), brother of the painter Balthus and himself a painter of some distinction. His pictures are erotic mainly through the unchaste gestures and gazes by which the figures communicate with each other in an otherwise quite prosaic setting. Klossowski's literalism has to do with Sade's *Philosophy in the Boudoir*: making men and women enact, rather than represent, certain philosophical positions and moral postulates. Klossowski's fascination with the power relations embedded in the language of abstract speculation - which he parodies by illustrating them in explicitly sexual terms - fits in well with Ruiz's scepticism regarding the relation of word to image and image to reality. But the switch from abstraction to the literal in Klossowski's scenarios of philosophical debate undermines traditional notions of interpretation that want to move from realism to the symbolic, or inversely, from the hidden to the manifest (as in biblical or psychoanalytical discourse). There is, as the tempting but fraught 'resolution' to this conundrum, the religious if not outright Catholic belief in the sanctification of the body by the word. Subjecting flesh to the logic of thought and language is ultimately to conduct a discourse that is both pornographic (writing desire with and on the body) and metaphysical (seeking the incarnation of the word). It is this latter dimension, typical enough of French modernism and postmodernism, which is absent from Ruiz's film. More interested in the problems of cinema (what is the relation between the *tableau* as a static image and the sequence that makes up the filmic flow?) and the problems of narrative (what determines the story potential of a visual configuration, and how does one get from one configuration to the next, without imposing on the image a text - a single fiction - which would arbitrarily limit those possibilities?), Ruiz plays the compliant agnostic even to Klossowski's iconoclastic Catholicism. 'Every time that a general theory or a fiction is elaborated I have the impression that (...) there is a painting stolen, a part of the story or puzzle missing. The final explanation is no more than a conventional means of tying together all the paintings. It's like the horizon: once you reach it, there is still the horizon.'

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